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SUBJECT: TURKEY'S MAIN OPPOSITION PARTIES FIND RELIGION

¶1. (C) Summary: Sensing that the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) may be vulnerable in the lead-up to local elections, the leaders of both of Turkey's main opposition parties -- the arch-secular Republican People's Party (CHP) and the nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP) -- have made overtures to Turkey's religious communities. The public reaction has been mixed: some commentators have praised the leaders for broad-mindedness and inclusiveness, others have thrown accusations of cynicism and electioneering at them. Both gestures need to be taken with a hefty grain of salt. Still, sincere or not, with AKP in its least favorable election environment yet, the strategy may bear fruit, and underlines some of Turkey's pressing social issues. End Summary.

¶2. (U) CHP Chairman Deniz Baykal took the first step in flirtation with the devout. The CHP prides itself in its opposition to the use of religion as a political tool. Baykal flouted this policy by pinning the CHP emblem onto a woman dressed in full chador at a ceremony for new CHP members and calling for the religious to join CHP. He justified his actions claiming that it is wrong to discriminate against people based on their beliefs or on the clothes they choose to wear. The reaction within CHP and the press has been lively and mixed. CHP's Istanbul Province Chairman, Gursel Tekin, praised the move, citing the inroads CHP has made into Istanbul's religious communities by offering medical support and training courses in practical skills. "They are poor and jobless. In the past, they supported AKP, and now they are disappointed. Can we tell them, 'You headscarved women, do not come to us'?" Other CHP members, such as Nur Serter, Mehmet Sevigen, and Mustafa Ozyurek, also registered their support, noting that the Anatolian women who supported Ataturk during the War for Independence in the 1920s were largely covered. Other members, including Istanbul MP Necla Arat, were not as sanguine, complaining that the chador is incompatible with the ideology of the CHP, and Baykal's overture threatens the party's very identity. A wide swath of journalists have dismissed the move as mere election grandstanding.

¶3. (U) Two days after Baykal's gesture, the MHP Chairman, Devlet Bahceli, spoke in favor of reaching an accommodation with Turkey's Alevi Muslim minority. In response to both an Alevi protest on 9 November and Deputy Prime Minister Sait Yazicioglu's angry accusations that the Alevis are making extreme demands of the state, Bahceli called for mutual respect and tolerance and for Parliament to defuse the issue of Alevis in a way that embraces both the majority Sunnis and minority Alevis with mutual understanding. The gesture is a

surprising one, as MHP-affiliated hoodlums were responsible for much of the violence suffered by Alevis in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. Alevi leaders are guardedly cautious in the press about Bahceli's statement, pointing out that the words are a positive development, but need to be backed by actions for Alevis to grow to trust the nationalists.

¶4. (C) Comment: Both gestures must be taken with a hefty grain of salt, given the election environment. Sincerity has never been Deniz Baykal's strong point; his highly tactical approach to politics has led him repeatedly to renege on campaign promises and to undercut newly-forged political alliances both within Parliament and within his own party. Bahceli's gesture to the Alevis, however, may carry more water. Bahceli has calmly and resolutely pulled the MHP leftward toward the political center. As a member of a coalition government between 1999 and 2002, Bahceli was able to cooperate constructively with the very leftists MHP was fighting in the streets a mere generation before to extend Kurdish cultural rights, privatize a number of state-run firms, and increase cooperation with the IMF and World Bank, all inimical to the MHP before him. While such gestures have not necessarily won MHP any Kurdish or leftist supporters, they have made the MHP a viable choice for moderate, center-right voters.

¶5. (C) Comment (cont.): Whether sincere or not, both gestures are sound political maneuvering. With AKP's popularity dipping in the polls and both corruption scandals and a potential economic downturn looming, the opposition is sensing that parts of AKP's voters are vulnerable to

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poaching. Veteran CHP member Sukru Elekdag told us in a 19 November meeting that CHP cannot compromise on the secular and unitary natures of the Turkish state, meaning the only weapons it has against AKP are the economy and honesty. Presumably offering a face less antagonistic to the devout would allow center-right voters who question AKP's recent performance to at least consider voting for the CHP. Likewise, MHP's conciliatory face on the Alevi issue may convince some voters concerned that AKP is a polarizing force on the subject of religion that MHP can offer less divisive solutions. Moreover, both moves bring a positive element to the divisive headscarf and Alevi issues; the potential for a further tempering of animosities on both issues is worth a few broken campaign promises and walking back from harsh rhetoric previously wielded.

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